Political Prisoners & the Question of Revolutionary Violence

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https://infokiosques.net/IMG/pdf/AD-LesPPviolence.pdf

images of prisoner revolts from the revolutionary prisoner newspaper Les Rebelles (1981-1982)

http://archivesautonomies.org/spip.php?article1823

with whatever weapons at hand

An intervention from Joëlle Aubron, Nathalie Ménigon, and Jean-Marc Rouillan—imprisoned members of ACTION DIRECTE—contributed to the 1998 International Day of Solidarity with Revolutionary Prisoners held in Gent, Belgium

"There's no such thing as a nonviolent revolution.… You don't know what a revolution is. If you did, you wouldn't use that word."

Malcolm X

"Political Prisoners & the Question of Revolutionary Violence"

The struggle to liberate political prisoners is not—and never has been—neutral. It is a struggle that must, above all, involve reappropriating the idea of revolutionary violence and confronting the genuine stranglehold of silence about violence that has fallen over the revolutionary movement after the defeats and setbacks of the guerrillas and all fighting forces in Europe. Since then, the bourgeoisie has made the very idea of violence unthinkable.

From Paris to Naples, from the factory floors to the ghetto streets, a recomposition of revolutionary forces has begun. It's undeniable. The resurgent revolutionary movement must now find the determination to break free from its prior betrayals of the proletariat, its unwitting complicity in reproducing condemnations of "terrorism" and trivializing already watered-down revolutionary messages, which can only further bind the proletariat to powerlessness and submissiveness.

Years of reformist pacifism and sectarian posturing about whether the exploited and the oppressed have a right to counter-violence have obscured all emancipatory possibilities. There are still some, of course, who may evoke the rifle but who never take the concrete actions necessary to prepare for and organize the revolutionary war. For them, the time for action is never here and is never now.

The vast anti-terrorism operations conducted to defend the State, of course, encouraged false revolutionaries to betray the movement in these ways. Even today, there are still some who organize campaigns for the freedom of political prisoners on these same bases of collaboration:

— First, there are those who say that the armed struggles from the 1960's to the 1980's were all for nothing, that their impulse was just the "death drive" of May '68's failures or old wounds that had never healed from the Occupation. For these "activists," the most important thing to do is to forget. The conclusion is obvious: nothing happened or will ever happen, so their betrayals, past and present, are justified.

— There are others who obscure the failures of the 1980's (all the guerrillas' fault anyways) behind all the confusion of their beliefs in "legitimate" protests. They trot out all of the usual ideologically empty formulas to justify their inaction: there's no Party, there's no working-class union, there's no organized autonomous movement…

These rear-guard campaigns for the freedom of political prisoners are one of the ultimate ways the revolutionary history of Europe is rewritten, further distorted by whatever's the latest biased, sectarian discourse.

We who for years have been held hostage by the state refuse to let ourselves become victims of their political schemes.

The struggle for the liberation of political prisoners isn't an act of charity or

compassion. Exposing the plight of political prisoners must be, above all, a form of agitprop in the wider revolutionary struggle. Struggling for their freedom means to immediately confront fundamental challenges in the revolutionary struggle of our time. Thus, this struggle is a political act, a position taken by our class to re-appropriate our memories and knowledge of struggle, thereby gaining strength and time in the fight to destroy bourgeois power. When we struggle for the liberation of political prisoners, we thus both re-appropriate the forgotten histories and experiences of past revolutionary struggles, but more importantly we also re-appropriate the legitimate idea of revolutionary counter-violence.

This legitimacy has been assailed, vilified, and distorted for years. But class struggle at its core invariably produces and reproduces the counter-violence of the oppressed, simply because it's inherent to the violence of the capitalist system. Violence is first of all the violence of exploitation, the oppressive pace of labor, and the discipline, misery, and hardship of the sweatshops. This is the violence of profit. The counter-violence of the exploited is natural—and legitimate—under this mode of production. It inevitably arises from and is the natural condemnation of the violence within capital's relations of production

A worker recalling how the struggles began against Renault's closure of the Vilvorde factory sums it up best: "The only ones who are violent are the bosses shutting down the factory and throwing us workers to the streets."

The capitalist system as a whole is violent. Each and every social relation under capitalism is violent. Violence is the very logic of imperialist subordination and impoverishment that condemns humanity to the furthest reaches of misery. Violence is the rising fascism in imperialist governments. Violence is the apartheid of institutional racism and the surge of reactionary politics. Violence is sexist, violence is racist…

Everyday life leaves the mark of violence on the bodies of every man and women who are exploited, oppressed, humiliated, and pushed to the brink of mere survival.

To resist and revolt against violence is a vital instinct of survival.

Violence is monopolized by our oppressors. It has been centralized and consolidated into state apparatuses and social relations. The confrontation between the state and the working class is still at the heart of conflict—all conflict—but in different ways than before. In the era of globalization, the state form is no longer the nation-state or alliances of nation-states alone. State apparatuses and social relations, as well as the global conjuncture of its contradictions and political crises, are now taking on different forms, since the state reflects the interests and divisions of transnational monopolies mired in a merciless war of competition.

Local, national, and international trans-state powers are militarizing cops and emergency anti-terrorist measures to protect their sovereignty. The more violent power becomes, the more violence is power. The more a handful of monopolies and capitalist elites usurp the very real force of economic power, the more they urgently need to manipulate with their all-pervasive propaganda the spectacle of "democracy" in order to legitimize their control. This is the joke that now tyrannically governs the violence of everyday life.

As a result, "legitimate" protests are not only considered by those in power as an acceptable enclave for channeling dissent, but it also now comprises a culture dependent on the bourgeoisie for survival, since protest movements secure their legitimacy in exchange for denouncing revolutionaries, maybe because of the fear that silence could be taken as tacit support for "terrorism."

Peaceful protests remain captive to how they're manipulated by those in power.

The actions of a social movement can only be a threat if they hold onto even the slightest possibility of transcending conventional forms of "legitimate" struggle, if their action can become revolutionary action by posing the question of violence. But today it's clear that "official" activists have internalized anti-terrorist ideology to the point of absurdity, unquestioningly endorsing precepts of public safety, law, and

order.

They vehemently echo that the weak are the aggressors and the powerful are the victims, that the rebels are the extremists and the oppressors are our legitimate representatives, our partners in the anti-fascist popular front and the "democratic" transition!

The institutional recuperation of May '68 has thoroughly legitimized these pseudo-revolutionaries, sanctified their renunciation, and now this new clergy can stigmatize "violent" protestors as an a posteriori justification for their seamless integration into the bourgeois elite.

The reason why May '68 was co-opted is because it was still co-optable. Since the movement wasn't able to entirely free itself from "legitimate," recuperable, forms of protests, its history was assimilated. But the insurrectionary autonomous movement of '77 that followed was not to suffer the same institutionalized fate. From the insurrectionary demos in Milan and Rome to militant actions resisting NATO and the "*assambleista*" movement in Spain, from rank-and-file workers revolts to the offensives of the guerrillas, the armed and autonomous movement of '77 genuinely ruptured the tacit unity of the movement in the imperialist core. As such, it had to be violently repressed and annihilated from collective memory. Those militants who fought in this historical breach had to repent or die in the "special" prisons built just for them.

The movement of '77 represented a real autonomous alternative to the system in a struggle fought to such extremes that all of the system's combined repressive forces made it suffer dearly to the bitter end.

Yet revolutionary violence still remains possible even today, especially since the imperialists have monopolized the entire realm of politics in order to protect themselves from the possibility of its return. Of course, revolutionary violence cannot and will not ever fit neatly into the anachronistic image many portray it as.

For them, it's nothing more than a mere fantasy, a faded memory, a fatal excess…

And these are the ones who should tell us how to combat imperialism and fight fascism?

Is there anyone who sincerely still believes that we're going to win by chanting the right slogans, struggling for local reforms, collecting a few more petition signatures, or organizing yet another march?

Simply by asking these obvious questions we're sure to hear the usual insults: "Adventurists!" "Substitutionists!" "Immediatists!" "Anarchists!"

As early as 1971, Lotta Continua perfectly captured the essence of such condemnations: "Those who furiously condemn 'terrorism' or 'adventurism' are in reality most often just hiding their own fears about their revolutionary responsibilities."

Today the situation is still the same.

Political prisoners are the symbols of the living legacy of revolutionary violence—two decades of revolutionary underground struggle, with all of its advances and setbacks. Political prisoners, for those who still believe in the emancipation of the proletariat and aim to identify its concrete possibilities, provide a glimpse into the need for armed violence to destroy the current form of our neoliberal societies, the need for armed violence to break free from the constraints of "legitimate" forms of protests that only perpetuate our submission to endless dictatorships. Armed violence alone can expose the truth behind the idyllic dreams of constitutional rights, new New Deals, a restoration of the Welfare State, or anti-fascist popular fronts with the "progressive" bourgeoisie, etc.

A brief digression: Today there are many people who attend weekly protests against Le Pen and the National Front…and march alongside the same people who are

responsible for imposing the deadly silence about political prisoners in Europe. For an imprisoned member of a guerrilla, a social-democratic prison warden is every bit as good as an authoritarian one: their methods are the same—solitary confinement, arbitrary searches, brutal beatings, etc—and they both cover up their abuses with the same unwavering arrogance.

In France, our comrades Jean Groix, Ramazan Alpaslan, and Pello Marinelarenari all died in their cells. There are currently many other comrades who are suffering from diseases that remain untreated because of harsh prison conditions.

Right at this moment, 200 political prisoners are rotting away in the prisons of the French state, and yet those who are responsible for their "slow death" are the same people who want to lead the fight against fascism!

Those who won't speak about imperialism and state repression must remain silent about fascism.

For "revolutionaries" within the imperialist core to genuinely become revolutionaries, raising the question of political prisoners and revolutionary violence is a decisive step.

First of all, it reveals just how entrenched collusion with "leftist" politicians has become in struggles involving mutual aid or anti-fascism. Remember that when they were in government, they were staunch defenders of a now-triumphant neoliberalism and were directly responsible for implementing new forms of racist apartheid as well as for granting the National Front proportional representation in government.

It's also crucial in the struggle against incremental reformism, inherited from the opportunism of the old "Communist" Parties. All those concepts of peaceful collaboration like the "mass line" or the denial of so-called "minoritarian" violence are unthinkingly used to postpone revolutionary action indefinitely.

Decades of "responsible" actions, concessions and collaboration, electoralism, business as usual, trivializing revolutionary commitment, etc. have all contributed to causing the revolutionary movement to lose sight of one of the central ideas of Marxist theory: the leap from capitalism to socialism will be accomplished through revolutionary violence. It can't happen otherwise.

Raising the question of revolutionary violence means rediscovering the revolutionary dream so we can reunite our struggles here and now with the goal of destroying the system as a whole, so we can restore the connection between the struggles we fight every day and the historical interests of our class.

Raising the question of revolutionary violence means acting upon our memories of past struggles and rediscovering the red thread that weaves through June 1848 and the Paris Commune, through the 1905 Revolution and the revolutionary upsurge from 1917 to 1923, through the Spanish Revolution of '36 and Barcelona's *Mayo* '37, through the Long March and the Cultural Revolution, through each war of national liberation and struggle for decolonization, through Che Guevara and the Cuban, Congolese, and Bolivian maquis, through the *mai pui senza fucile*—"never again without a rifle"—of the Europe-wide '68 to the autonomous offensives of 1977 and 1978…

Raising the question of revolutionary violence means putting theory back into action. Historical knowledge and experience of past revolutionary struggles are intimately connected to the stakes of revolutionary practice and direct action today.

Theories of struggle will never be reducible to what's new or what's orthodox. With each resurgent revolutionary movement, it's crucially important to break with the former's spectacles and the latter's dogmas in order to re-appropriate theory in action.

In the present, just like in the past, preparing for and putting revolutionary violence into action, as the concrete desire to realize moments of working class power,

portends the coming of communism. Without a theory, a memory of past struggles, and a revolutionary practice involving violence, proletarian militants will never be able to develop a coherent strategy of building working class power.

This is all the more important because in our era the decisive revolutionary subject is a critically precarious proletariat. The subject of social transformation is no longer the professional worker, nor even the post-war mass worker, but rather an impoverished worker afflicted by all the violent intensity of global exploitation. The revolutionary subject—from Jakarta to La Courneuve, from Los Angeles to Lagos—is an international subject. The homogenization and polarization of its subjective and objective conditions have radically changed the conjunctures of class struggle. Today, the recomposition of the proletariat can no longer be accomplished through the same methods of struggle and organization as before. This is obvious. Worse, these same historical methods have even become obstacles that further intensify its socio-economic precarity along with all the consequences of political and cultural marginalization. The precarious proletariat will never be recomposed as a revolutionary class through strikes or politicized unions, nor by joining one party more rhetorically radical than another. This isn't possible today. The proletariat will only be politicized by taking direct action in the flames of revolt. The proletariat will be inevitably pushed towards violent confrontation through their miserable living conditions as well as the repression inflicted on them by the rulers of a dying capitalism.

Preparing for the coming armed confrontation means taking action from the very start for the recomposition of the working class, acting for the unity and politicization of the international precarious proletariat. Preparing for the coming armed confrontation means building the consciousness that this international class is the only class with the ability to lead the revolutionary process to its end. As an international class formed to take on this role, its historical and collective nature is to destroy its immediate and individualized nature as an economic and political slave of capital.

This process of building consciousness and organization will be long, a class war in which sporadic clashes will generalize into insurrectionary struggles.

Confronting the question of violence immediately leads to a solution of the revolutionary organization of the international working class. It is an attempt at collectively and practically responding to arming the proletariat with the will to arm themselves and wage a revolutionary war against capital. This is the context in which this question of violence arises in the heart of the struggle for the political autonomy of the working class.

On the way to revolution, the international working class will raise their program and their rifle with the same spirit because they're indissociable. They will defend their class interests and wage war in order to ensure they triumph. The class interests of the international proletariat will guide their rifle, and their rifle will lead them to discovering their international interests—without any concessions.

To conclude:

What does the question of armed violence mean today on the International Day of Solidarity with Revolutionary Prisoners?

From the depths of our cells we can already hear the spiteful objections. No, comrades, we don't think armed violence is the sole revolutionary question, nor the only question that needs to be addressed urgently. The guerrillas' positions have always been and are still being distorted. Insisting that they have no basis in reality is too often just an alibi for avoiding any real interrogation into the necessity of violence or how it should be organized. Dismissing the political integrity of the guerrillas has only been a way to dismiss any real debate.

As imprisoned members of the guerrilla, all that we're trying to do here is raise a few fundamental aspects of this question, its relevancy today, and the contradictions it entails for all militants in imperialist countries.

One of the main contradictions is that though many people support guerrillas elsewhere in the world, it's rare for them to make the leap from supporting revolutionary violence in specific places to the international context and thus to the concrete stakes of action here, because supporting a revolutionary guerrilla immediately poses a political problem of action. For instance, doing one's utmost to help guerrillas succeed in Mexico, Turkey, East Asia, or elsewhere should also demand a deep reflection about what's required of revolutionaries in the "belly of the beast," in the strongholds of the imperialist core where the capitalists live and breathe, where they divide up their shares of the world's wealth in an unchallenged dictatorship, exploiting and oppressing the international working class.

In 1972, Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof, and other RAF comrades offered a first attempt when they destroyed the military headquarters where the US Army planned the bombings of Vietnam. This action was a concrete expression of solidarity from anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggles in the imperialist core with national

liberation struggles in the periphery.

For the last three decades, capitalism's relations of production and exchange have become globalized in an unprecedented way. This is confirmed day after day. Yet, globalization also and above all means the internationalization of class struggle.

Now that globalization has arrived, how can anyone understand why someone would take up arms in the Sierras yet still condemn those who take up arms in the strongholds of the imperialist system? Why is the particular situation of the international class struggle so predominate over the general situation? What's the genuine revolutionary position?

The international proletariat's revolutionary project is the pursuit of international unity.

Revolutionaries must support this "long march" however they can wherever they live. They must work towards the recomposition and politicization of the international working class within the prevailing contexts of our time in their local and global diversity. Everywhere, revolutionaries must fight against any obstacles and limits that confine our struggles to nationalist or liquidationist frameworks, which are more closely linked than ever before. And in the imperialist core, any form of nationalizing class struggle or liquidating it into the state are becoming increasingly reactionary as they're exploited by the fascist form of monopoly capitalism.

The immense reserve army of poor workers, the new slaves in the imperialist cores, and the disinherited in the urban ghettoes now comprise the majority of humanity. This precarious proletariat is the single axis around which the question of sharing social wealth and appropriating the means of production must be resolved. No other class or strata of a class can be substituted for the international proletariat in the revolutionary process, especially not any nationalist representatives of the working classes in the imperialist core who always end up defending economic "progress,"

liberal reforms, and imperialist citizenship.

How can we believe that there is any glimmer of hope remaining in the limbo of the "left of the left" and other "legitimate" protest movements? They all end up fighting to hold onto or improve small local gains. This is their bureaucratic fate.

They are also well aware they can only win small reforms on the express condition that they continue to divide the working class and only focus on narrow issues within their borders, policed by armies and anti-terrorism operations. They're all complicit in apartheid.

For half a century in the European imperialist core, the triumph of "social democracy," both within the state and peacefully protesting from outside of it, has revealed their deceit. The half-solutions of populist programs haven't rescued the proletariat from the clutches of monopoly capitalism. On the contrary, they've only ever acted for their own interests. The gulf between monopolized wealth and poverty has never been as violently apparent. Intensive exploitation is considerably worsened by high productivity, the infernal pace of work, but also by the precarity and insecurity of the existence of millions of workers.

For the proletariat, institutional politics has only ever been a choice between electing a lesser evil. Most don't even play along.

Internationally, the working class stands alone faced with the alternative of socialism or barbarism, a choice forced upon it by capitalism's development and decay.

Wherever the international proletariat revolt, they must take up arms, from the alleyways of Gaza to the *barriadas* of Bogotá, from Chiapas to the ghettos of Europe... Everywhere, the masses are freeing themselves from the obsolete frameworks of institutionalized parties and unions that will always be powerless and inadequate faced with the new political horizons of globalization. Everywhere, the proletariat is generalizing new forms of resistance through self-organization and self-

education, searching for its political autonomy. Of course this won't happen without many mistakes. Dogmatic and sectarian beliefs are spreading like a new plague. Yet, the spirit of liberation is still taking shape, stronger than it was before.

Everywhere, the revolting proletariat is rediscovering the meaning of revolutionary violence—rifles, or lacking them, stones. Yet we're supposed to believe that the time of the guerrillas has passed, that armed struggle is ancient history!

We're supposed to believe that all this changes nothing for revolutionaries here, that we have to tirelessly follow revisionist incrementalism to the point of absurdity, that today we must patiently prepare for supposed insurrectionary tomorrows with words alone. The only genuine way to prepare for revolution is through revolutionary action. Legalism, pacifism, and reformist concessions have never brought revolution closer. Only revolutionary action, accomplishing what needs to be done through our own self-organization, can bring forth the spirit of revolution.

The emerging revolutionary upsurge proves the centrality of steadfast connections between struggles for working class autonomy, liberation through arms, and proletarian internationalism. This is only the start...

We are right to revolt!

Dare to struggle dare to win!

June 19, 1998

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A.D.